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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

SECRETARY OF LABOR
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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The Honorable Reed E. Hundt
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

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Federal Communications Commission
Office of Secretary

Dear Mr. Hundt:

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I write in response to the Commission's vitally important effort to interpret and implement those provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 intended to expand the availability of advanced telecommunications services in support of education and training.

As you know, the law explicitly extends the benefits of universal service support to educational institutions at the elementary and secondary levels. The provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that extend universal service support to secondary schools are essential, for they ensure that these schools have access to advanced telecommunications services on an affordable basis. But it is no less important that community colleges are provided access to these technologies on the same basis. If we are to provide the education and training required for the vast majority of new jobs in the coming century, we must look beyond the high school to the community college to provide the technology-rich learning required of a globally competitive workforce. To assist them in fulfilling this vital workforce development role, community colleges should be assured affordable access to advanced telecommunications services.

The arguments in favor of granting community colleges access to advanced telecommunications services in their own right are many. More and more community colleges are using interactive video technologies to provide instruction to their students through distance learning and other advanced methods of teaching. Distance learning offers great hope of bringing quality instruction within the reach of many geographically isolated communities and businesses, but it remains an expensive proposition. Permitting community colleges to benefit from universal service mechanisms will make distance learning more cost effective, and enable community colleges to extend educational and training programs into many previously unserved rural and isolated communities.

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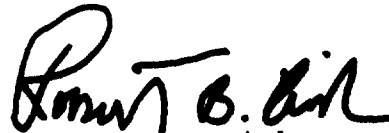
WORKING FOR AMERICA'S WORKFORCE

Other valuable services would be made more widely available by community colleges if they were to benefit from universal service support. The Department of Labor and the American Association of Community Colleges, for example, have initiated an ambitious program to create Internet "access zones" for America's Job Bank (AJB)--the country's largest computerized job listing service--on community college campuses. In less than one month, over three hundred of the nation's 1,100 community colleges have signed up to participate in this venture, and we expect their number to grow substantially in the coming months. This initiative will use the power of the Internet to bring together businesses looking to fill jobs and individuals seeking work in a way never before possible.

Unfortunately, some community colleges now find their access to the Internet and similar services severely limited by cost factors. In a very real sense, community colleges are "low income consumers" of telecommunications services as that term is used in the 1996 Act 47 U.S.C. §254(b)(3). The community colleges operate within financial constraints that limit their ability to access advanced telecommunications technologies. Without the benefit of discounted core and advanced technological services, the ability of community colleges to provide their communities with a full range of technology-based services, such as the AJB, will be jeopardized.

Assuring affordable access to telecommunications technologies for community colleges will allow individuals in all parts of the country to access technologies that will improve their lives. The American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of Community College Trustees have filed comments with the Federal Communications Commission consistent with these concerns. We concur with their goals and we urge the Commission to interpret and implement the Act in such a way as would extend its benefits to community colleges to the greatest extent possible under the law.

Sincerely,



Robert B. Reich